

VZCZCXRO1258
RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHVB #1024/01 3241510
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 201510Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8348
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ZAGREB 001024

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [HR](#) [POLITICAL PARTIES](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTIONS 2007 - THE DIASPORA VOTE

REF: ZAGREB 1021 and previous

SUMMARY

1. (U) This cable, the fifth in our series of pre-election reports (reftels), focuses on Croatia's unique institution of diaspora-elected parliamentary seats. With polls predicting a very close race between the ruling Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) and the opposition Social-Democratic Party (SDP), the spotlight is turning to the possible crucial role of the diaspora vote in the upcoming Croatian parliamentary elections. Under Croatian electoral rules, the seats of the eleventh electoral district come from votes of some 400,000 Croats who do not reside in Croatia, but mostly in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH). With the SDP not even running candidates in this district, the HDZ is intensifying efforts to increase voter turnout in BH to capture as many seats as possible in this solidly HDZ-leaning electorate. END SUMMARY.

WHY DO THEY GET A VOTE?

2. (U) All adult Croatian citizens are guaranteed a vote by the Croatian Constitution, wherever they reside. Voters who reside in Croatia but happen to be outside of Croatia's borders on election day can vote in diplomatic-consular missions for representatives of one of ten electoral districts covering their place of residence in Croatia. Each of these 10 electoral districts chooses 14 representatives.

3. (U) A much larger category of voters are Croats in the "diaspora" who do not have any residence in Croatia, who vote in a special "eleventh district". Some 400,000 Croatian citizens are eligible to vote in this district, the vast majority of them Bosnian Croats who have lived in B-H for centuries, and who have no ties to any specific residence or district within Croatia. Since diaspora voting began in 1995, eighty percent of votes in the eleventh district have come from BH Croats. The eleventh district does not have a fixed number of seats. Instead, the final number of seats is based on the average number of votes needed to win a single seat in the other ten districts of Croatia. This means the number of seats available to the diaspora varies based on the turnout in Croatia itself versus the turnout in the eleventh district.

THE HDZ LOVES THEM

4. (U) The diaspora voters have traditionally supported the HDZ. In 1995, when the law guaranteed 12 diaspora seats, the HDZ swept them all. From 2000, the number of seats shifted to being based on turnout, but the HDZ took all six seats in the 2000 election. All four diaspora representatives in the current Parliament are HDZ, elected on low diaspora turnout of only 18 percent in 2003. This support is based on the fact that it was the HDZ which gave the BH Croats the right to Croatian citizenship in the 1990's and defined them as part of the diaspora, partly because of territorial designs

the HDZ leadership at the time had toward B-H. Even after the HDZ's policies toward B-H changed, whenever the diaspora's right to hold seats in the Croatian Sabor has been criticized domestically, it has been the HDZ which has defended that right. The HDZ has often argued that B-H Croats were among the first in the defense of Croatia and, as Croatian citizens protected by the Constitution, cannot be treated as second-class citizens.

THE SDP DOES NOT

15. (U) Soon after Zoran Milanovic was elected SDP president in June 2007 he announced the SDP would seek to abolish the eleventh district and tie voting rights to a place of residence within Croatia. Milanovic does not question the Croatian citizenship of B-H Croats, but considers their right to vote in Croatia an anachronism, since they are a constituent people within Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some commentators have pointed out, however, that the SDP made no serious effort to abolish the diaspora district while it was in power from 2000 to 2003. (NOTE: A recent Constitutional Court ruling that B-H Croats have the right to vote in a referendum on Croatian membership in the European Union appears to link voting rights to citizenship and not residence. This could mean that abolishing the 11th district would require constitutional changes. END NOTE.)

16. (U) Having thus alienated eleventh district voters, the SDP lost little when it decided not to run any candidates in the district, and in fact may be hoping to boost its appeal among domestic Croatian voters who resent the diaspora's electoral influence. A June 2007 poll found two-thirds of those domestic Croatian voters polled thought the diaspora should not be entitled to vote in Croatian elections.

THE BATTLE OVER TURN-OUT

ZAGREB 00001024 002 OF 002

17. (U) Polls indicate that one possible election result on November 25 is that the SDP will win more seats within Croatia proper, but that the HDZ will have more seats in the Sabor thanks to the diaspora vote. This would be the first time the diaspora seats actually swung an election, since previous elections have never been so close.

18. (U) HDZ is well aware diaspora votes might tip the scales in their favor and has intensified efforts to boost diaspora turnout, which has been steadily declining since 1995, and has not exceeded 130,000 in the past ten years. In September the MFA urged its ambassadors and consuls to encourage voters abroad to go to the polls as "a task of great political significance." Though it made no mention of any political party, since the SDP had already announced it would not run in the diaspora district, this clearly favored the HDZ. The Ministry has also decided to considerably increase the number of polling stations in B-H. The Croatian NGO GONG, which conducts non-partisan monitoring of the election process, has noted that the rationale for this increase is unclear.

19. (U) The SDP, for its part, is looking to boost domestic turn-out, since larger domestic turnout would increase the number of diaspora votes required to create an additional diaspora seat or seats. In this way, even an increase in domestic HDZ voter turn-out would bring some benefit to the SDP campaign. The SDP is also seeking to stoke resentment of foreign votes by making "Let's Decide IN Croatia" its key slogan for the final weeks of the campaign.

COMMENT

10. (SBU) Some observers within the SDP and elsewhere have even questioned whether an HDZ victory that depended on diaspora seats would be legitimate. Clearly, a dominant victory by one or the other party that left the diaspora representation a moot point would produce a more secure majority. But our sense is that even a result

that was swung by the diaspora would be accepted politically. It might well spark further heated debate about electoral reforms, but it would still present a workable majority. President Mesic, who is personally opposed to the diaspora vote and would like to see it abolished, told the Ambassador on November 19 that his decision after the elections regarding which party to give a mandate to try and form a government would be based on his judgment of which party could successfully put together a coalition that would hold a majority of the Sabor seats. Saying, "any seat in the Sabor is equal to any other," he rejected the idea that in that calculation he could make any distinction between domestically-elected and diaspora-elected representatives.

BRADTKE